



Artist's Space: Olivier Otten

by Kurt Mueller



No webpage, let alone a URL with artistic ambitions, has made me think more intensely about a mouse cursor than my recent encounter with [Selfcontrolfreak](#) (2008-2010). Internet surfing entails scrolling, finger spazzing and shifts between icons, but rarely with sustained reflection. Yet what do you do when the web video you are watching eats your little gloved pointer?

The brainchild of Dutch "interaction designer" Olivier Otten, *Selfcontrolfreak* is an ongoing video series, currently 21 and counting, by which the viewer causes Otten to perform various actions through prescribed movements of the mouse cursor. If this sounds easy and a little dumb, like an obvious arrangement of command and execution, i.e. a video game, it is and it is not.

A typical *Selfcontrolfreak* video shows Otten, a young male with a sleepy expression and longish hair in a T-shirt or hoodie, squarely framed against a white wall. #14, for example, is a zoom-in of this scenario. The cursor moves over Otten's blunt features, Otten's face reacts. Pointing to an eye provokes a wink. Passing over his mouth elicits a smile or frown. Cheeks puff and pout. "Touching" his nose makes it scrunch, as though tickled. Other motions in other videos influence other narratives: point and click on a can of beer, then a glass, then Otten's mouth, and he pours then chugs, ad nauseam (#13). Circle the cursor—clockwise and counter—and Otten pedals an exercise bike (#18). Each video invites a moment of focused attention, a hand-eye riddle and, invariably, amusing trial and frustrating error.

If this lab rat stimulus and response seems to run thin, the real surprises, delights and conceptual depth emerge as Otten bites back—literally. In #2, bring your cursor too close to Otten's face and he lunges forward to swallow it. The video then cycles on Otten loudly chewing your cursor. The link between your hand and virtual icon isn't broken, but subsumed to a story; slide left or right and Otten's head follows. Click and he spits the cursor out. Again, Otten explores variations of the theme. He hocks a loogie onto the screen, slaps the cursor away from his face or grabs the arrow and runs away with it.

Despite seemingly limited and repetitive parameters, each scenario freshly thwarts expectations, upsetting conventions of video, if not Internet viewing. #16 finds Otten pushing against the edge of your browser window, expanding it lengthwise, and then stomping to make it quake. *Selfcontrolfreak* not only replaces passive reception with participation, in a sense merging the antics of YouTube with the hyperactivity of hyperlinking, but erases Internet video's "fourth wall." Viruses aside, the assumption that one's window onto the Internet, one's self-perception of web-navigation is a stable, controlling identity, is in theory subverted. As Otten suggests, exactly who is in control appears open to negotiation—the ultimate answer perhaps being the actor who exerts a greater desire for self-control.

The most exciting works intensify this issue by allowing a nuanced, weighted role in narratives of will. Otten understands that cursor movement itself is not just frictionless tracking and tapping. In #7, one must click and drag Otten's head to pull it into a bucket of water. Such documentary pathos fully humanizes the distance between virtual and living subjects. (Some of *Selfcontrolfreak*'s most affecting moments are views of Otten existentially waiting for the action to begin, seemingly twitching impatiently as each clip loops).

Selfcontrolfreak is also funny, a feature that provides its most immediate satisfaction but also its potential slide towards gimmick. The darkness of the resulting laughter however suggests *Selfcontrolfreak* is not just an invitation to mindless play. In the spirit of Nauman and Acconci, it is a self-reflexive look at media and the theatrics of corporeal identity. It also opens up a question, metaphorically and literally, of agency. One is free to move one's cursor wherever, but the subsequent narratives are programmed, determined. Otten the performer, as well as his retaliatory embodiment of both the watchmaker-cum-programmer and the cursor, similarly exist somewhere between object and subject. His simple actions are a reminder that the professed freedom of the web actually is controlled and coded—a code we create in our own self image.

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